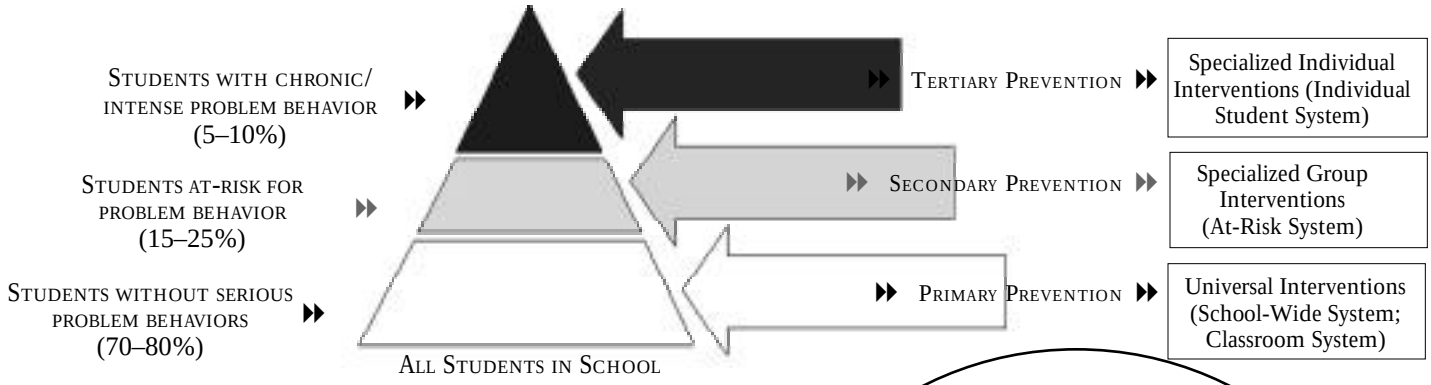
THE SPECIAL EDGE BEHAVIOR

# A Whole-School Model of Behavioral Reform

The research by G. Roy Meyer, professor at Cal State Los Angeles, suggests that structures in schools and attitudes of teachers support problem behavior in students. Before schools are able to effectively encourage positive behavior among students, the school's administrators, teachers, and parents need to alter their approach: from looking at children as individuals who need to be changed to looking at the environment around the students and changing that, including what adults do and how they respond to students.

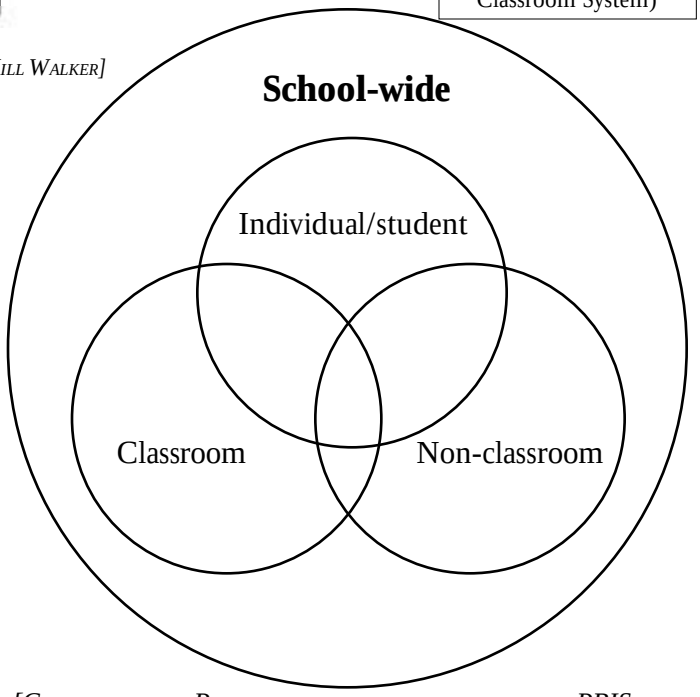
Simultaneous research results by George Sugai, co-director at the National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, demonstrate that positive behavioral supports for individual students can also be used successfully as an intervention approach for an entire school. When applied to a large system, it moves beyond simply reducing challenging or impeding behavior. It incorporates multiple approaches in order to change systems, alter environments, teach skills, and focus on positive behavior. It is essentially an ongoing, problem-solving process that approaches the challenge of behavior with proven tools: applying thorough assessment, designing effective interventions, teaching new skills, and supporting efforts to improve.




*[Chart reprinted with the permission of Jeffrey Sprague and Hill Walker]*

An effective school system, according to the University of Oregon's Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, takes into account the necessity of a continuum of supports for appropriate behavior. Most students in a school (75–80 percent; see chart above) can benefit from school-wide instruction on behavior. But supports and procedures also need to be in place for those students who are at-risk for, or who exhibit, chronic behavior problems. The advantage of a systemic approach that establishes and reinforces clear behavioral expectations is that when 70 to 80 percent of the student population knows how to behave, more resources are available for the ten percent of the students who are in clear need of help.

School-wide behavioral support plans, in addition to taking into account the needs of the individual students in the school, also consider the contexts within which problem behaviors occur, both in and outside of the classroom (see chart, right). In this way, the entire school is included in any plan designed to alter the environment of the school in support of positive behavior.

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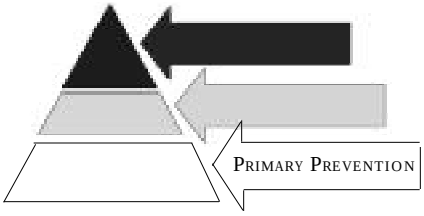
# A Proactive Approach to School-Wide Discipline




School-wide positive behavioral support takes a team-based and systems approach and teaches appropriate behavior to all students in the school. Success requires developing procedures to accomplish the following:

1. Define behavioral objectives. A small number of clearly spelled-out behavioral expectations are defined. These often are simple, positively framed rules, such as "Be respectful, be responsible, and be safe."

2. Teach behavioral expectations. These behavioral expectations are taught to all students at the school, and are taught in real contexts. The goals of the teaching are to take broad expectations (like "Be respectful"), and provide specific examples (like "In class, being respectful means raising your hand when you want to speak or get help"). It requires the same teaching formats applied to other curricula: the general rule is presented, the rationale for the rule is discussed, positive examples are described and rehearsed, and negative examples are described and modeled. Students are then given an opportunity to practice the right way of behaving until they demonstrate fluent performance. Students practice until they "get it."

3. Acknowledge appropriate behaviors. Once appropriate behaviors have been defined and taught, they need to be acknowledged on a regular basis. Some schools do this through formal systems (tickets, rewards); others do it through social events. In schools that successfully create a competent culture, adult interactions with students are positive four times as often as they are negative.

4. Proactively correct errors in behavior. When students violate behavioral expectations, clear procedures are in place for letting them know that their behavior was unacceptable, and for preventing unacceptable behavior from resulting in inadvertent rewards. Students, teachers, and administrators all should know what exactly will occur when the rules are broken.

5. Use a team approach to evaluate and adapt programs. School-wide systems of behavior support involve on-going modification and adaptation. Successful schools establish a simple, efficient strategy for continually assessing their success, and a decision-making process that allows the staff to adapt to new behavioral challenges. When problem behaviors become more intense and frequent, functional assessment-based methods may need to be considered.

6. Secure active administrative support and involvement. School-wide behavior support involves the active and on-going support and involvement of key administrators.

7. Integrate individual student support systems with school-wide discipline systems. School-wide behavioral support is a process for establishing a positive culture in a school. The procedures do not, however, replace the need to also build and maintain a comprehensive set of procedures for supporting the smaller number of students who require more intense and durable behavioral support.

## IDEA Underpinnings for Positive Behavioral Supports

| Past Practice | Current Thinking | The Difference |
|---|---|---|
| Students may require Behavioral Management. | Students may require Behavioral Support. | Behavioral Management came to imply a focus on consequences, whether positive or negative. Behavioral Support includes addressing the environment, teaching new behaviors, and using positive reinforcement strategies. |
| Behavior Management Plans focused on specifying the consequences of misbehavior and, to some extent, the consequences of acceptable behavior. | Behavioral Support Plans focus on understanding why the behavior occurred and then on teaching/eliciting an alternative behavior that meets the student's needs in other, more acceptable ways. This includes lesson plans, teaching strategies, and classroom structuring to support new skills. | Behavior Management Plans rarely attempted to understand the reasons a student misbehaved. Behavior Support Plans are designed to understand the behavior, teach an alternative that meets the student's needs, and change environmental conditions in an effort to permanently change the way a student seeks to get his/her needs met. |
| Consequences were delivered to students in an effort to get them to stop misbehavior. The consequences were either strongly aversive so that the student would avoid the misbehavior, or strongly positive so that the student behaved in order to receive the reward. | Antecedents, the triggers or predictors for the behavior, are recognized as critical in changing behavior. The emphasis is on identifying what is in, or missing in, the environment or instruction that can be changed. | Consequence-based plans are never strong enough for some students. Antecedent-based plans seek to alter environmental conditions (e.g., time, space, materials, interactions) and student skills so that lasting change is possible. |
| Past philosophy: problem behavior needs to be controlled or eliminated. Positive behaviors are to be expected, regardless of the environment. | Current philosophy: positive behavior needs to be taught — modeled, shaped, and cued in a conducive and supportive environment. | Past: Controlling behavior is becoming increasingly more difficult in today's classrooms. Current: Teaching positive replacement behaviors has potential for lasting change. |

Chart created by, and used with permission of, Diana Browning Wright, California Department of Education, Diagnostic Center South

# Individual Behavior Support Planning Required by Federal Law

*by Diana Browning Wright, School Psychologist and Behavior Analyst, CDE, Diagnostic Center South*

School psychologists, counselors, and other support staff are increasingly being called upon to "do something!" in the face of suspensions, expulsions, or simply recurring misbehavior among students. That "something" so in demand now affords us a long-awaited opportunity to institute wide-sweeping changes in what schools do to support our students who possess fragile coping systems.

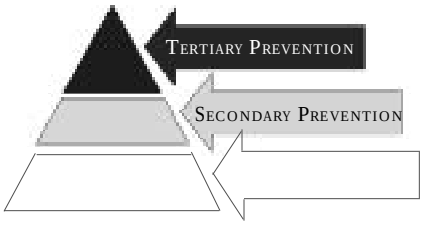
The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA '97) requires the IEP (Individualized Education Program) team to address "behavior that impedes his or her learning or that of others" (IDEA Section 614(d)(2)(B)), and the Federal Regulations further point out that "positive behavior interventions, strategies and supports" are to be considered supplementary aids and supports. Therefore, if the student had these impeding behaviors clearly in evidence, and yet no IEP team had appropriately developed a plan to address these behaviors, it can be concluded during a "manifestation determination" meeting that must occur in these disciplinary contexts, that the IEP did not have all necessary supplementary aids and supports in place. Therefore, proceeding to expulsion or other further disciplinary action would not be consistent with IDEA because the required Free and Appropriate Public Education (with all necessary supplementary supports in place) was not in place at the time of the behavior.

Rather, the IEP team will now need to review the appropriateness of the IEP and the placement; conduct a functional behavioral assessment of the behavior that has resulted in disciplinary action; and identify and implement the necessary, supplementary aids and supports that were missing. The inescapable conclusion is this: Whenever a student who receives special education services exhibits difficult behaviors, whether early or late in an escalating behavior pattern, the IEP team must address the situation, and ensure that all of the teachers and service providers know their specific responsibilities to support the student. This duty — making sure that everyone involved knows about the necessary supports — results in a behavior plan.

## IEP Content Shift

Prior to the IDEA Reauthorization, IEPs had focused primarily on student goals and objectives. With the change in the law, the IEPs of those students whose "behaviors are impeding learning" now must contain specific strategies and supports that the teachers and service providers will implement (i.e., a behavior plan).

A well-designed behavior support plan specifies not just what the student will do, but what educators will do to alter environments and/or teach new behaviors that may be necessary for that student's success. Thus, higher accountability for success is placed on educators because *a behavior support plan is essentially a teaching plan, not simply a listing of goals and objectives the student will achieve.*




## Changing our understanding of behavior

Does this situation mean that we should now simply develop lengthy behavior contracts with our students, specifying exactly what punishment we will apply if the student misbehaves again? The answer is an emphatic "No!" A change in philosophy is required. Many educators once ascribed to the practice of behavior management, believing that they needed to (or even could) suppress or control problem behaviors and could expect positive behavior, regardless of the environment. They now need to shift toward behavior *support*, where positive behaviors are taught through modeling, shaping, and cueing in a conducive environment.

## How to develop behavior supports

In order to effectively eliminate a problem behavior, educators must understand why it was occurring in the first place. To determine this "function," we must consider various reasons why the behavior could be occurring. Remember, the consultant is "assigning" communicative intent. The student may or may not be aware of the "function" of the behavior.

The first step involves gathering data to determine whether it is possible that the student was trying to "get" something with his/her behavior, or to "protest, escape or avoid" something with the behavior. This is often easy to hypothesize, based on a review of records, conversations with the student and educators, and a study of the environmental context. Consider the two examples that follow.

Colin has autism, is six years old, and is essentially nonverbal, using gestures and behavior to communicate his needs and wants. His mental age is estimated to be approximately two years. He becomes upset if routines are changed, screaming and hiding under a chair to demonstrate his feelings. Currently, Colin is in an inclusion setting and he follows the routines of the other kindergartners. He has the support of a classroom aide, the services of an inclusion specialist, and a teacher who is anxious to improve his skills.

Ralph is an eighth grader with a reading disability who has been in a pull-out special education program since fourth grade. Ralph has had 17 office referrals in two years and was suspended ten times last year. Offenses have included task refusals, improper clothing, swearing at teachers, failing to suit out for P.E., physical fighting and sexual harassment of a sixth grade girl. These offenses have increased in intensity since entering middle school as a sixth grader. His grades in elementary school were Bs and Cs. In sixth and seventh grade, his grades averaged D+. There had been no behavior plan for Ralph, though he did participate in a bi-weekly "motivation group" with the counselor.

(continued)

Last week, Ralph threatened another student by saying he would "have my homeboys kill you." The police became involved after testimony from the victim's parents.

In the cases of both Colin and Ralph, effective behavior support planning will require a determination of what is supporting the problem behavior as well as what is present, or absent, in the environment (or instruction) that is preventing the student from gaining, protesting, or escaping something in an acceptable way.

## Ralph's behavior support

While the school recommended expelling Ralph, the manifestation determination (see previous page) concluded that no supplementary aids and services to address an evolving pattern of negative behavior had been in place. Because Ralph's behavior was clearly impeding his learning, a behavior plan had been warranted, but not implemented. The results of the functional behavioral assessment concluded that Ralph's behaviors were attempts to gain attention (social status) from his gang-member peers. Ralph was referred to an alternate setting by parent, district, and probation office agreement. Ralph will receive instruction in conflict resolution skills to assure that he does possess alternative replacement behaviors to use in the future. He will also receive support from former gang members through a police juvenile diversion project. The hope is that this intervention will allow him to gain the attention and social status he so desperately wants from a different group of peers.

His environment will be changed — the place, the people with whom he interacts, and the way eductors respond to him. Ralph will receive encouragement and rewards for replacing his negative behaviors with positive ones. In addition, a former gang member mentor will support his efforts to change. Ralph's future minor misbehaviors will be dealt with in counseling sessions. Any new seriously threatening behaviors will require police and district interventions, including more restrictive settings.

## Colin's behavior support

The behavior plan for Colin suggests that he engages in these behaviors because he is protesting a change in his routine that he does not understand. To add to his frustration, he lacks the ability to verbally negotiate what he does want. He is not able to effectively communicate in order to appropriately protest. Colin will receive training in "Picture Exchange Communication System" whereby he learns to exchange an icon for a desired activity, and to protest (and negotiate) using these symbols. Additionally, his environment will need to be changed to help him cope with frustration and to teach him to follow a picture sequence. Following a picture sequence thus becomes the routine, and the individual activities can more readily be shifted within the routine, eliminating Colin's need to protest changes. Effective methods of calming Colin are noted on the plan, specifically, singing 'Itsy, Bitsy Spider' and redirecting him. Communication between home and school is specified to allow all parties to better understand Colin and his needs.

## Implications

While many students who receive special education services do not have behaviors that impede their learning, or that of their peers, others do. At long last, these latter students' IEP teams will focus on developing alternative behaviors that meet their needs and, by changing their environment in some way, will help to eliminate their need to exhibit those behaviors. "All service providers will be informed of their specific responsibility to accommodate, modify, and support" according to IDEA, thereby assuring implementation occurs.

## A cautionary note

Some students have needs for mental health interventions to address "longer range issues," such as home life, emotional disturbances, and other life stressors. A behavior support plan is designed specifically to address the "here and now" of a classroom setting, the match of learner to environment. A behavior support plan should not be construed as meeting all of a student's needs, nor should it be viewed as a panacea for all factors that may be affecting a student at any given time. There will be students who do not need a behavior support plan, but who do require mental health services. There may be students who need behavior support, but not mental health, and there may also be students who need both.

To view or print completed Behavior Support Plans for both Colin and Ralph and to access blank plans and instructions, go online at
http://www.calstat.org/bplans.html

*This article is adapted from the original: "Addressing Behavior That Impedes Learning," first published in NASP Communique, 27(7).* 

## Generating a Hypothesis For Two Students

| *Student's Problem Behavior* | *If Trying to Get Something* | *If Trying to Escape Something* |
|---|---|---|
| Ralph has a learning disability, belongs to a gang, is belligerent to teachers, and has a pattern of rule-breaking behaviors culminating in threats to kill a peer. | Ralph may be actively attempting to gain gang members' attention in the form of social status in the group for his behavior.* | Ralph may have been threatened for not "acting tough enough" and may fear his peers will harm him if he doesn't demonstrate his allegiance. |
| Colin has autism, is non-verbal, and often screams and hides under tables when his routines are disrupted. | Colin may be seeking attention from the teacher in the form of the interaction that he remembers will occur when he begins to scream. | Colin may be protesting the absence of an alternate activity he desires, or he may be trying to escape the interaction with the teacher he remembers will occur in this new activity.* |

✯ = The IEP team arrived at this hypothesis, from which they developed a behavior support plan. View the plan at http://www.calstat.bplans.html.